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THE CHARACTER AND WORK OF JOSIAH.

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When Josiah came to the throne, there were, in Judah, three political parties seeking to shape the affairs of the nation—the Egyptian, the Assyrian, and the Jehovistic. To the two former, Jeremiah thus alludes: “What hast thou to do in the way to Egypt, to drink the waters of Shihor? or what hast thou to do in the way to Assyria, to drink the waters of the River?” (Jer. 2: 18). The growing popularity of the Egyptian party called from him these sarcastic words: “Why gaddest thou about so much to change thy policy (literally, way)? thou shalt be ashamed of Egypt also, as thou wast [in the time of Manasseh] ashamed of Assyria.” (Jer. 2: 36).

The problem to be solved had reference to the preservation of the integrity and independence of the Southern kingdom. Israel had fallen. Its inhabitants had been carried into captivity. Judah was threatened with a like fate. The sins which had called forth from the prophets of the Northern kingdom such bitter denunciations, and which had undermined the character of the people, thereby paving the way for the downfall of the nation, were only too prevalent in the sister kingdom. “The wages of sin is death” is true of nations as well as of individuals. But there were in Jerusalem many so-called statesmen who were indifferent to moral considerations, and who saw in the fall of Samaria only increased danger to Judah by the breaking down of the natural barrier that had served to isolate the Southern kingdom from the nations on the North and East. But whatever the explanation of the same, the leaders of the three political parties recognized the danger to which the nation was exposed. They were agreed also in this, that Judah’s salvation turned upon securing the support of a powerful ally. They had, however, no other point in common. They recognized the common danger, but sought each in his own way to meet the same.

The Egyptian party sought that ally in the house of the Pharaohs; the Assyrian, in the king of Nineveh. Fifty years before, an Egyptian policy would have been an impossibility. Then the Egyptians were fugitives among the swamps of the Upper Nile, fleeing before the victorious soldiers from the far East. In Josiah's day, however, Egypt was once more taking her place among the nations; while the Assyrians were occupied with affairs nearer home. Upon the basis of these facts, the Egyptian party in Jerusalem predicted that the Egyptians were destined to recover their former supremacy. They therefore urged that the wise thing for Judah to do was to secure, if possible, the support of the same. The leaders of the Assyrian party interpreted recent events differently. The Assyrians had been compelled to withdraw their armies from the West, and to give their attention to the dangers with which they were threatened on the North and South. But they were suffering only temporary reverses. Their authority was weakened, not destroyed. After having checked the inroads of the Scythians from the North, and after having put down the insurrections in Babylonia, they would again turn their attention to the West and reëstablish their supremacy along the Nile. Assyria, and not Egypt, was therefore the one whose good-will and coöperation it was worth their while to secure.

The prediction of the leaders of the Egyptian party as to the supremacy of Egypt was well-grounded. Never again were the armies of Assyria to stand on the soil of Africa. In less than half a century their capital had fallen, and their country passed into the hands of the Medes and Babylonians. On the other hand, Egypt, from the beginning of Josiah's reign on for thirty years, continued to grow in power and to extend its sway over the neighboring states. It was not until after Josiah's death, that Pharaoh Necho met, at Carchemish, with his first serious reverse.

The Jehovistic party had no sympathy with the reasoning of either of these parties. Its leaders were seeking to keep the people free from all foreign alliances and to make Jehovah in practice, as well as in theory, the nation's Protector and Deliverer. They were idealistic. To some of their contem-

poraries, they must have appeared visionary, living in the clouds and out of all sympathy with the real needs and problems of their times. To the leaders of the Jehovistic party, an alliance with an outside nation, however inviting, was entangling and compromising, an act of disloyalty to Judah's real king. To seek such an alliance was not only to put "their trust in the arm of flesh" (cf. Jer. 17: 5), but also "to refuse the waters of Shiloah that go softly" (Isa. 8; 6). In support of their position they appealed to the teachings of the prophets, past and present. Had not Isaiah condemned Hezekiah for his unwillingness to enter into an alliance with Merodach Baladen? Had not Hosea condemned Ephraim for making a covenant with Assyria and for carrying oil into Egypt to secure the good-will of the same? The rebuke administered by Isaiah to Ahaz because of the reliance of the latter upon the king of Assyria for help in the war with Rezin and Pekah was in the same line.

It is impossible to state which party, the Egyptian or the Assyrian, had the larger following; but the Jehovistic was, undoubtedly, small in comparison with either of the other two. It commanded, however, the thought and the services of the best men in the nation. Later, Zephaniah and Jeremiah were its most prominent representatives.

What, upon his accession, were the political sympathies and convictions of Josiah, it is not possible to determine. Perhaps we ought not to expect the political views of a lad of eight, even though he be of royal descent, to be very pronounced. More to the point is the question: What were the views of those who were his chief advisers during the early years of his reign? Was he under the influence of those who were seeking to commit him to a foreign alliance? Or was it his good fortune to have, from the very beginning of his reign, the counsel and advice of those who held that Jehovah alone was able to save the nation and to ward off the threatened danger? A positive answer cannot be given. It is, however, no rash conjecture to assume that at the beginning the young king was not under the influence of the Jehovistic party and that it was not until later that he came into contact with the leaders of the same. However that may be, it was

eight years after he had become king, before Josiah decided to cast in his lot with the Jehovistic party and to use his influence to make the nation loyal to Jehovah, its rightful king. Possibly only his political conversion is referred to by the Chronicles writer: "In the eighth year of his reign while he was yet young, he began to seek after the God of David his father" (1 Chron. 34: 3).

Through the influence of such men as Zephaniah and (possibly) Hilkiyah the high priest, Josiah was led to appreciate the magnitude of the danger with which the nation was threatened and to consider how the same was to be met. He was led to see that the very life of the nation demanded the overthrow of idolatry and the restoration of Jehovah worship. He was also led to recognize the fact that the imperative need was for a change of character, not for a change of policy. Reformation, not revolution, was demanded. But the king was slow to act. Four years elapsed after his becoming affiliated with the Jehovistic party before he decided to adopt radical measures. It was in the twelfth year of his reign, four years after he had begun to "seek after the God of David his father," that he undertook "to purge Judah and Jerusalem from the high places and the Asherim, and the graven images and the molten images" (2 Chron. 34: 3).

How is Josiah's slowness to act to be explained? Two things are worthy of consideration. In the first place, we need to keep in mind Josiah's inheritance from his father and grandfather. The latter, Manasseh, enjoyed the double distinction of having reigned longer than any other king of Judah and of having done more to harass the worshipers of Jehovah. In the fierce persecutions of his reign, many find the historical basis for the statement in Hebrews 11: 36-38. Tradition speaks of Isaiah as having been sawn asunder during the reign of this king. Amon, his successor and the father of Josiah, pursued the same religious policy. He "walked not in the way of the Lord," but worshiped idols, thereby bringing to bear against the Jehovah worshipers all the influence of the royal house. If then in religion heredity counts for aught, Josiah was not from his birth predisposed to look with favor upon those who held that Jehovah was entitled to the supreme place in the hearts and lives of the

people. Again, his slowness to act becomes more intelligible if we assume that he was not a mere tool in the hands of his political advisers, and that he was accustomed to weigh carefully all the facts bearing upon a given case before coming to a definite conclusion. Had he been a mere enthusiast, he would, upon the slightest provocation, have broken with the past and reversed the policy which had controlled Manasseh and Amon. Independence of thought and action was characteristic of the king.

But in the fourth year after he had begun to "seek after the God of David his father," Josiah was led to set on foot a movement having in view the extermination of idolatry. Men acting under his authority began to destroy out of the land all symbols of idol worship. The work of extermination was also carried into the territory of the Northern kingdom, which, either because of the weakness of the Assyrian rule in the West or because of the vigor with which Josiah had pushed his conquest in that direction, had come under the sway of the latter. But what were the motives that led the king just at that juncture to institute so vigorous and radical a reformation? There were probably two: (1) the earnest and incisive preaching of men such as Zephaniah and those associated with him, and (2) the fear of a Scythian invasion. The Scythian hordes from around the Caspian sea had begun to break over the mountains which separate Middle from Western Asia, and to invade the fertile plains of the Tigris and the Euphrates. They swept every thing before them. Only the walled cities were able to withstand their attacks, while the open country was speedily overrun and plundered. They carried woe and desolation. They spread terror on every side. They were cruel, merciless. They killed, they butchered, they destroyed every thing upon which they placed their hands. From the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates, they swept onward over the countries farther to the West. They invaded Palestine. They laid bare the countries along the Mediterranean. They reached even the confines of Egypt. Exaggerated stories concerning their appearance, the cruelty they practiced and the damage they inflicted, spread among the nations and filled the people with alarm.

The Scythian invasion made a deep impression upon the people of Judah. They saw their danger and flocked to the capital for protection. The prophets, the preachers of righteousness, put their construction upon these events. They saw in the terrible invaders from the North the Scourge of God who was coming to execute upon the nation because of its sins the fierceness of the anger of Jehovah its God. They rebuked the people. They called upon them to amend their ways and to return unto Jehovah with all their heart. To the king they did not appeal in vain. He realized the magnitude of the crisis and yielded to the solicitations of those who time and again had urged him to do all in his power to purge the land of the outward symbols of idolatry. Permission was given. The work of extermination was begun. Altars and images were broken down. In his zeal Josiah was led to desecrate the graves of the priests, a crime similar to that which Amos denounced so roundly in the case of the king of Moab (2 Chron. 34:5 and Amos 2:1). To these measures the people offered at the farthest only a feeble resistance. They recognized their impotency, and were willing to submit to any indignity if by so doing they should escape the ravages of the Scythians.

This attempt at reformation was, however, abortive. It was superficial in its character and wanting in permanent results. The people had rent their garments, but not their hearts. They had neglected to break up the fallow ground and to circumcise themselves unto the Lord. As soon therefore as the pressure was removed, the work began to languish. No sooner had the Scythian wave spent its force than the people began to go back to the gods which in their alarm they had cast to the bats and moles. The idolatrous forms of worship had been removed; but the idolaters remained. Six years later the land from one end to the other was practically given up to idolatry.

To the king and the leaders of the Jehovistic party the result was humiliating and disheartening. But what could they do? Devise new measures and await a more opportune time for carrying them into effect? In the meantime, Josiah gave orders for the renovation of the temple. During the progress of the work, there was found a book called "the

book of the law," "the book of the law of the Lord by the hand of Moses," and "the book of the covenant." The book was immediately carried to the king, before whom the same was read. As the oak in the forest is wrenched by the tempest, so was this man of robust strength and independence affected by the contents of the book. How such a book could have dropped out of the people's knowledge, and for so long a time have remained hidden, was not a question that troubled the king in the least. He accepted the book as being what it claimed to be, and was as a consequence deeply moved by what it contained. In the light of this book, the nation was certain to fall and its people to be scattered among the nations. But was there no hope? Were the worshipers of Jehovah powerless? Must they stand idly by and, without being able to do anything, watch the collapse of the nation? So great was the perplexity and unrest of the king that he sent a committee unto Huldah the prophetess for light and guidance. Her answer was, that the doom of the nation was sealed, but that because of the effect which the reading of the book of the law had had upon the king, punishment should, for the time being, be deferred. But, if because of the conduct of one person punishment was to be deferred, might not the day upon which the same was to fall upon the nation be, in view of the repentance of a whole people, indefinitely postponed? In other words, were not the curses pronounced in the book of the law conditional? "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." But the Ninevites repented, and the city was, for the time, saved. Might not a radical change in the character of the people of Judah be attended with a like result? Thus reasoned the king and the prophets. The contents of the book of the law and the answer of Huldah furnished therefore the highest incentive to renew the effort to bring about a reformation of the national character. The prophets were anxious to profit by the warnings of the book and to begin anew the work of reforming the people. Their efforts were warmly seconded by the king, who, as a preliminary step, called together the people of Judah and Jerusalem and compelled them to enter into a covenant to walk after Jehovah and to keep his statutes. That the part which the people acted on that occasion may

have been only a matter of form may be inferred from the fact that the word of an Oriental despot was final and authoritative. But the king, at least, had given proof of his willingness to aid those who were engaged in the effort to bring about a reformation. With the details of the work we are not acquainted; but it is not improbable that Jeremiah and the king visited, in company, the principal cities of Judah, the former explaining and enforcing the teachings of the book which had been found in the temple, the latter superintending and directing the work of destroying the images and altars connected with the worship of the false gods. It was the part of the prophet to rebuke and exhort, that of the king to uproot and destroy. The work which was under the supervision of the king was similar in character to that attempted in the reformation of six years before; but it was carried on with more zeal and thoroughness.

Two questions: (1) How long were the king and the prophets engaged in this second attempt to bring about a national reformation? (2) Did the famous passover of Josiah referred to in 2 Chron. 35: 1-19 and 2 Kings 23: 21-23 precede or follow the great reformation? A definite answer cannot be given to the first, although perhaps a long time was not occupied in the attempt. So far as the second question is concerned, is it not more probable that the pass-over followed the reformation?

Little is said concerning Josiah's military exploits. The little that is known is, however, significant. He made Judah independent. He recovered from the Assyrians the territory of the Northern kingdom and exercised authority over the same. He also considered himself strong enough to take the field against Pharaoh Necho when the latter was marching towards the Euphrates with a view to bringing Syria under Egyptian control. An interesting question arises: Did Josiah enter upon this campaign against the advice of the leaders of the Jehovistic party? Was his decision to take the field against the Egyptian king additional proof of his independence?

His work, however, was done. His days of usefulness were at an end. Mortally wounded at Megiddo, he returned

to Jerusalem only to die. But what was his work? Was it not to arrest, if only for a moment, the process of moral disintegration, and to aid those who were making a last heroic effort to lead the people back to Jehovah, their rightful king? How well he performed his part may be inferred from these statements: "Like unto him was there no king before him, that turned to the Lord with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his might, according to the law of Moses" (2 Kings 23: 25); and he [Josiah] "made all that were found in Israel to serve, even to serve the Lord their God. All his days they departed not from following the Lord, the God of their fathers" (2 Chron. 34: 33). Such praise is not discriminating. It is extravagant; and yet it was in a large measure justified by Josiah's sympathy, especially from the twelfth year of his reign, with all moral and religious movements; and by his well-meaning, yet fruitless attempt to force the people to renew their allegiance to Jehovah. For the work to be done, he was in every way fitted. He may have been of a religious turn of mind, yet he was not dreamy, visionary, mystical, but positive, aggressive, warlike. Had the condition of affairs been more favorable, he would have converted Judah into a powerful and compact nation and have been to the Southern kingdom what Jereboam II. was to the Northern. Had he lived in the times of the Maccabees and been a private citizen, he would have been a Zealot of the Zealots, and have surpassed the most zealous in his zeal for the law. He failed to bring about a radical and permanent reformation, not because of any defect in his character, not because of any weakness or lack of earnestness on his part, but simply because the process by which the national life was poisoned, and the national character undermined, was too complete to be permanently arrested by any power, human or divine. The favor of Jehovah, because of the transgressions of the people, had been withdrawn. The nation was abandoned to the fate which it so richly deserved. The plans of men were therefore destined to come to naught. Josiah did what he could to ward off the evil day; but Judah had sown the wind. It had therefore to reap the whirlwind.